

By Niru Ratnam

In November 1908 Pablo Picasso held a gathering in honour of the self-taught painter Henri Rousseau. *Le Banquet Rousseau*, as it was named, was attended by the likes of Guillaume Apollinaire, Juan Gris, Leo Stein, Gertrude Stein as well as Picasso's art dealer Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler. At the end Apollinaire stood up and delivered a poem, *Ode à Rousseau*:

*"You remember, Rousseau, the Aztec landscape
Forests where mangoes and pineapple grow
Monkeys spilling all the blood of the watermelon
And the blond emperor shot to death there?
The pictures you paint, you saw them in Mexico..."*

Rousseau's naïve style of painting had become a source of inspiration for a group of artists such as Picasso, who owned a number of Rousseau's works. Picasso was the leading figure a group of artists determined to build on the legacy of the Post-Impressionists and decisively break with what they saw as the stultifying strictures of nineteenth century figurative and landscape painting and produce art that was appropriate to the dizzying changes they were seeing in the early twentieth century modern world. From the 1890s onwards a number of avant-garde artists such as Paul Gauguin had started to look beyond the West in order to find the simplicity, authenticity and directness of expression that they felt was lacking in conventional western art. This was a phenomenon that later art historians called 'Primitivism'. Rousseau was somewhat removed from this set but his awkward-looking, unconventional paintings often of tropical scenes, had been given the status of a home-grown primitive because of his subject matter of the 'Aztec landscape' and non-conventional technique.

However, there was a catch. Rousseau had never actually left France. His knowledge of tropical plants had not come from Mexico as Apollinaire insisted, but in fact from the Parisian botanical gardens, *Le Jardin de Plantes*. Rousseau's jungle paintings, filled with lush plant life and startling animals were fantasies constructed from the former customs officer's visits to the gardens and from imagery seen on postcards and books. This deception and act of imagination is clearly echoed in the new series of works by Henry Hudson, 'Sun City Tanning'. The first sign of the nod to Rousseau comes from Hudson's entry on Wikipedia. Here it states that the artist's recent work was made in response to the experience of visiting the Congolian forests, having an accident while water-rafting, being rescued by the Congolese army and becoming intrigued by shamanism. There is also more than a nod to Joseph Beuys in this and in particular his story about the wartime crash of a diver bomber that Beuys was gunner on. Beuys' story about his subsequent rescue by Tartar shamans who rubbed him with animal fat and nursed him back to health by wrapping his body in felt has since been largely debunked.

Hudson's Wikipedia entry is similarly imaginative. The works were produced in his studio in East London and far from a response to his experiences in the jungle, were made following visits to Kew Gardens and source material from books and the

internet. However this is precisely the point. By referencing Rousseau and Beuys, Hudson is foregrounding the artistic strategy of valorizing an alternative reality beyond the mere everyday. Beuys's imaginative account would go to anchor his whole practice with fat and felt used symbolically to refer back to the story, and with shamanism running as a theme through his work.

Meanwhile the celebration of Rousseau by artists such as Picasso was part of the wider phenomenon of primitivism. Picasso, Matisse and other like-minded artists such as The Fauves started using radically simplified imagery that had strong formal affinities to the tribal market they saw in ethnographic museums. This would culminate in works such as Picasso's 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (1907). Primitivism has been a much debated concept by art historians. Whilst a generation of modern artists admired and adopted tribal objects, few of them paid much attention to the process by which those objects had ended up in Parisian museums and markets; colonialism. Art historians and curators have debated the ethics of this at length but what seems clear is that modern artist's approach to the tropical was both idealized and almost entirely a work of the imagination. Hudson references this in two ways; firstly and most simply through his Wikipedia statement. As with most modernist encounters with the tropics his is an encounter that is entirely imagined. The dense jungle scenes that are both the setting and subject for the works do not correlate to any specific non-western tropical setting. Secondly and more subtly Hudson's works shift the idea construction as being a mental construction to the actual physical process of construction. Hudson uses a painstaking technique of layering heated plasticine and letting each layer dry. The result is a surface that looks like it is made from heavy impasto brush-strokes of oil paint. He constructs the 'painted' field so much so that it is debatable whether the works he produces are paintings or sculptures. There is a pun here around the idea of construction. Modernism was built on a highly constructed view of the non-west, Hudson takes this process one step further. It underlines a paradox at the heart of primitivism. The authenticity that tribal masks and jungle settings seemingly provided for Picasso and Matisse was an entirely constructed authenticity. The jungle was not a friendly place filled with happy natives making simple masks. The masks came from a system of signs and signifiers that were entirely lost when they were exhibited out of context in ethnographic museums. Early Modernism was based on a sham. Paradoxically it could be argued that this does not necessarily lessen the impact that works such as 'Les Femmes d'Alger' have. It is still a powerful painting, indeed a work that announces the birth of modern art. This simply complicates notions around that birth and its particular the assumption of unfettered, authentic, unmediated expression that underpinned these modernist experiments. Hudson's new works gleefully take up the impossibility of an authentic, unfettered modernist vision through their foregrounding of construction of the work of art at both a mental and physical. There is a joy in the process of making. The bright colours come from Hudson mixing and preparing his own pigment which he then uses to colour the plasticine. The colours are vivid and create an intense, hallucinatory effect. There is a certain reveling in the fact that this is a way of producing work that is diametrically opposed to the modernist ideal of an expressionist painter picking up a brush and letting emotion directly pour out, as if the movement of the loaded brush were some extension of the artist's sub-conscious.

The paintings in 'Sun City Tanning' are accompanied by a series of pots, made in collaboration with Hudson's brother, Richard W.M. Hudson. The pots themselves are simple, hand-coiled objects made without throwing the clay. One reading of them is to see them as referencing the pots used as sacred vessels in shamanism. A more general reading could see them as substitutes for the tribal artefacts and objects that modernist painters valorized, Picasso's and Matisse's famous encounters with African masks is re-imagined as an encounter with these somewhat wobbly, humble pots. Hudson's new work seems happy with the mis-recognition and imaginary encounters that lay behind modern art's breakthroughs. They ask this: does it matter that the modernist encounter with the non-west was based on a series of myth and misunderstanding? What happens when the constructions and assumptions are not just recognized but foregrounded but even celebrated?

There's a paradox from later modernism that Hudson also not just foreground but arguably celebrates. The wall-based works that Hudson has produced are his most sculptural 'paintings' yet. Layers of plasticine are built up so much in places that they quite visibly rise off the surface of the picture plane. By doing this, Hudson is referencing and debunking more myths around modernist painting. After the Second World War, the modernist quest for authentic, unmediated expression developed in different directions but the most celebrated of these was with the works of the New York Abstract Expressionists and through the interpretation of that body of work by the critic Clement Greenberg. The notion of an authentic vision that pierced through the superficial lay at the heart of work by the likes of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. All would produce immensely powerful works but the question of the possibility and form that a truly authentic expression could take remained elusive. However Greenberg attempted to characterize what lay at the heart from modernist painting in his essays by trying to define a set of 'competencies' that if fulfilled would result in a great modernist work. In particular Greenberg claimed that a competent modernist painting had to call the viewer's attention to the specificity of the work as an object, rather than merely a pretty picture filled with decoration.

Greatness lay in abstraction, as the referential was a pointless façade. And greatness lay in flatness. The less a painting pretended to offer a view of the world around us, the more competent it would be. Flatness was the cure against the decorative – the absurd, in Greenberg's view, attempt to make visually-pleasing but meaningless art. Greenberg's quest was a rigorously academic one, yet like the rest of the modernist quest for the authentic, it was beset by its own set of assumptions. Why would a painting's flatness point to its own status as an object? Indeed with time flatness itself and drawing attention to the painting's status as a painting would become a mere stylistic tic, most visibly seen in a recent generation of artists whose work has been dubbed 'zombie formalism'. This label describes a generation of artists such as Jacob Kassay and Lucien Smith for whom Greenberg's strictures became a check-list of how to make a painting that was appealing to the market. Greenberg's rigorous quest for quality was reduced to a style. It itself became mere decoration that the critic hated. Hudson's use of three dimensions can be seen as the cheerful antidote to this. It refuses flatness. It refuses the power attributed to the expressive brush-stroke by quite simply not being a brush-stroke. Each 'stroke' is arguably a tiny

sculpture carved out of a medium used by children to play with. His work is a response that fully accepts that modernism in all its different facets would always fall at its key hurdle – the idea of authenticity. As this became clear there were at least two sets of responses, the first being the postmodern embrace of the failure of authenticity. The second was the transformation of modernism's experiments into a market-ready style. Hudson's response is neither of these. It accepts the constructed nature of the supposed authenticity that various strands of modernism adopted, from the use of primitivism, through expressionism and surrealism. It even gently revels in the construction of these moments of the authentic. It then responds to post-war Greenbergian strictures by simultaneously rejecting one key Greenberg demand (that of flatness) whilst exemplifying another (the call for an artwork to draw attention to itself as an object). These are heavy objects, sculptural objects that have a characteristic smell. They call attention to themselves. They are not paintings but they are where modernist painting ends up. They are vividly expressive with hallucinatory colouring whilst refusing expressionism's reliance on the unmediated. They use a deliberately juvenile material, plasticine, whilst insisting on the ability of the artist to work with the most unpromising material to produce something that is expressive. They attest to the most marvelous thing at all, that even though the modernist quest for authenticity would always trip over its own assumptions, that those failures could be the most profound thing about the whole enterprise at all.